Most Frequently Asked Questions About EAS

Q. How does the system help me?

A. The EAS transmits national, state and local warning messages that can be used to notify you, your family and friends about emergency situations. In many cases, the EAS can and does save lives.

Q. Why is my radio , TV or cable program interrupted by the EAS signal?

A. The system is designed to automatically break regular programming to provide guidance to your specific viewing or listening area. The EAS uses a digital system that allows broadcast stations, cable systems, participating satellite companies, and other services to send and receive emergency information. This provides the public with timely emergency life saving messages.

Q. Can I receive the signal if I am not watching television or listening to my radio?

A.The EAS provides the option to turn on new, specially equipped consumer products, such as car radios, pagers and other devices to receive an EAS alert and warning.

Q. How can I be sure that I receive the alerts?

A. Contact your local station to determine what emergency messages will be transmitted.

Q. What if I have a disability?

A. According to FCC rules, television broadcast stations and cable systems activating EAS must transmit both audio and visual messages.

Q. Can I receive EAS alerts on Spanish-language stations?

A. A station may transmit EAS messages in a foreign language normally used by the station and cable systems.

Q. How often do Broadcast stations transmit the EAS Test?

A. They are required to transmit an EAS test once a week.

Q. Where can I obtain more information on EAS and get additional publications?

A. You may contact the FCC's National Call Center at 1-888-Call-FCC. To get additional publications or FCC rules, please visit our website via the Internet at www.fcc.gov/cib/eas.

Making the EAS System Work:

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in conjunction with the National Weather Service (NWS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) implement EAS. Each of these agencies play significant roles in the success of the EAS.

The FCC provides information to broadcasters, cable system operators, state and local emergency managers. The Commission also ensures that state and local EAS plans comply with EAS requirements.

The NWS develops emergency weather information to alert the public of eminent dangerous weather conditions. FEMA contributes assistance to state and local emergency planning officials to help develop and execute their active participation in the EAS.

On numerous occasions, FCC officials have stated that "the EAS is saving lives because of early, accurate warnings."

Seventy percent of all EAS activations are a result of natural disasters. In 1998 alone, the FCC received "over 500 EAS activation reports from broadcasters for emergencies ranging from fires, evacuations, and toxic chemical spills."

What's Ahead?

On December 31, 1998, cable systems with 10,000 or more subscribers were required to participate in EAS. In 2002, cable systems with less than 10,000 subscribers and all wireless cable systems will become EAS participants. With these new participants and the proliferation of EAS consumer devices, EAS will reach almost all of our citizens with accurate timely warnings. The FCC, FEMA and NWS are working to insure EAS continues to grow and function effectively.

Emergency Alert System

"Life Saving Messages" To the Nation

Background

In January 1997, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) activated the Emergency Alert System. This new system replaced the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS) established in 1963 and CONELRAD (Control of Electromagnetic Radiation), a program started by the Truman administration.

Following the FCC's adoption of the EAS rules in November of 1994, equipment manufacturers, broadcasters, and cable operators have been preparing to participate in EAS. Many people have heard of the new system but some are unsure as to exactly what the new EAS is, who will use it, and what makes it better than the old system.

EAS: A Basic Understanding

EAS is an industry government response to a Presidential Statement of Requirements, providing the Commander and Chief the capability to address the Nation during emergencies. At the national level, the EAS can only be activated by the President. The EAS places the Nation's multi-billion dollar broadcast and cable industries at the President's disposal. These industries include more than 14,000 radio and television stations and 11,000 cable systems serving over 33,000 communities. EAS must be available to the President within 10 minutes (utilizing normal activation procedures) from any location.

EAS - vs - EBS

In order to fully realize the improvements provided under EAS, a basic understanding of EBS is helpful. Under the EBS program, all FCC licensed broadcast stations were required to have equipment that would allow the President to reach the public during national emergencies. This equipment produced what was commonly termed a two-tone signal (the frequencies 853Hz and 960Hz transmitted simultaneously) and was broadcast by stations on the main audio channel. They served the dual purpose of getting the listeners attention and activating other EBS equipment in the surrounding area. Upon activation of the EBS equipment, a station would listen and record the accompanying audio message and then retransmit this message for their audience. In general, upon activation, EBS equipment could do little more than reproduce the dual tone signal and alert station operators. Once a station received an EBS message, the station operator could only rebroadcast the EBS message and two-tone signal in order for the next station to receive the information.

EAS - vs - EBS cont

If a station failed to activate their EBS equipment, the chain would be broken and a segment of the population would not receive the emergency information. With EAS, the situation is vastly different.

The major difference between the EAS and the EBS is the technical capabilities of the new EAS technology. EBS used a two-tone audio signal transmitted by broadcast stations to activate a receiver. EAS utilizes new digital equipment and the EAS digital signal contains codes that identify the key elements of a message. Elements identified include: the message originator, the event, the location of the event, the valid time period of the message, etc. These message elements provide a method for broadcasters and cable operators to automatically interrupt their programming. With the proper software, the EAS equipment is also capable of providing warnings in the language normally used by the station or cable system, such as Alavision (a Spanish language programming broadcast station).

EAS signals can also travel over non-broadcast frequencies and telephone lines. If you are not home watching television or listening to the radio, EAS provides the option to allow new specially equipped consumer products, such as cellular phones, pagers, and other devices, to receive a EAS alert and warning. In effect, these newly designed devices can be turned on for selected emergency messages.

EAS TESTING

Testing of the EAS system occurs on a weekly basis and are originated from local or state primary sources at random. Each EAS participant must receive and transmit an EAS test weekly. A weekly test consists of transmitting the EAS header codes and End of Message codes (EOM) only. This test only takes approximately 10 seconds because only digital information is transmitted. Unlike the weekly test, the monthly test must be transmitted by participants within 15 minutes of receipt. The monthly test can be scheduled and broadcast stations and cable systems are encouraged to choose a time convenient to all participants in the EAS. The monthly test script can be developed locally and may be used to place added emphasis on emergency events that may also occur in that particular area.

State & Local Plans

Who determines when a test takes place? Who has the authority to activate EAS? These questions are answered at the state and local level by volunteers whom form the EAS State Emergency Communications Committee (SECC) and Local Emergency Communications Committee (LECC).

Under EAS, all states and territories have a SECC with Co-Chairs, usually with one representative from both the broadcast and cable industries. In some states however, a member of the emergency management community serves as a vice chair. Most states formed SECCs under the previous EBS system therefore, they were "grandfathered" into the EAS system. The chairs are appointed by the FCC and create the state EAS plan. Although the SECC chairs need to create a plan for their state while serving on a voluntary basis, they do not have to go it alone because the SECC group is composed of LECC chairs, members of industry and government officials. All members serve on a voluntary basis.

Most states are divided into local EAS areas. Which areas are determined by the state Chairs and often have their own chairperson. The LECC chairs designate at least two Local Primary (LP) sources. The LP's serve on a voluntary basis and are points of entry for EAS messages. Initially, the LP's will be broadcast stations due to the structure of the national system, but eventually cable systems may serve as primary sources. Participants that are not information points of entry are known as Participating National (PN). LECC chairs also help the SECC develop the state plan. Many states utilize a state relay network that has at least one National Primary (NP) station as an input. NP's are the source of national messages. The state network will also include a State Primary (SP) source . SP's originate state messages and relay them to the entire state.

Stations volunteer to serve as primary sources. Stations are not required by the FCC to broadcast state or local EAS alerts but usually do so in order to serve their community. Stations also have the option of adopting Non-participating National status (NN). NN stations must have EAS equipment but are required to go off the air in the event of a national alert. NN stations may transmit state and local messages at their discretion with no prior FCC approval. All participants must broadcast a national message. Testing of equipment is required by all stations regardless of status.

For additional EAS information, contact the FCC's website at www.fcc.gov/cib/eas.or the National Call Center at 1-888-CALL-FCC.